

Danziger

I first want to say that it is indeed an honor to have been asked to speak here today.

As many of you know I am primarily an editorial cartoonist. Which is an odd profession. Somebody said that editorial cartoonists are people who come down after the battle to shoot the wounded. It is a dishonorable profession, and thus the honor at being asked to speak is all the more. I assume that the committee invited me to speak because they wanted some comic relief.

Down at Boston University they wanted they same thing this year. They invited Fred Rogers. And at Harvard they wanted something humorous, too. They asked Gorbachev. Who is going to tell some Yeltsin jokes.

This may not be the most elucidating speech you will ever hear. You have to understand that editorial cartoons try to reduce the events of the world to simple concepts. The simpler the better. Thus the Soviets were always huge black bears with little Russian Army hats on, with a little red star on front for communism. And they were big and mean, and they were always doing something evil. And the United States was Uncle Sam, this old guy with chin whiskers, slightly befuddled, kind of out of it, but basically a nice guy.

So you had the bear - bad. And Uncle Sam - good. And the cartoon was bad versus good. For instance the bad bear was threatening to beat up the Afghanis and good Uncle Sam was standing there with his arms folded, saying you better not or else.

Editors always encourage us to draw very simple cartoons like that because ... we're trying to get back those readers we had lost to television.

I thought you might prefer something lighter perhaps than the usual graduation speech. This is "graduation speech lite". Sounds great. Less filling.

You get a lot of advice at graduation.

You remember how in the movie "The Graduate", the guy says to Dustin Hoffman, "One word, Benjamin: Plastics." Now it's, "Two words, Benjamin: Plastic surgery."

My one piece of advice is to keep your sense of humor above all. But this is much more difficult in theses times than it used to be.

As I said before, I work primarily as an editorial cartoonist. Most people think that editorial cartoonists sit around all day grinning and giggling at the foibles of mankind. But it's not that way. I read five newspapers a day, I read the newsmagazines,

watch CNN, all the news programs, four or five hours of C-Span, and so on. It's all war and starvation and crime and death, Very funny stuff.

But the trouble is, in editorial cartooning these days, you can't keep up with reality. A few years ago the novelist Tom Wolfe said that the problem with writing fiction these days was that every time you had an idea, non-fiction beat you to it.. And cartooning is the same. We now have self-cartooning politicians. I mean if you proposed a cartoon in which a vice-president tries to blame a billion dollar riot on a television sitcom no one would print it. Editors would ask, ``Where do you get these crazy ideas?'' If you propose a cartoon on trade dumping where the President of the United States throws up on the Prime Minister of Japan, everybody's seen it already.

Quayle told Bush not to worry about the fact that Bush's popularity had fallen to 35%. Because Quayle's popularity was 20% and together that added up to 55%, so they had the election in the bag.

Here's an actual case. They told Barbara Bush that they had seen George Bush coming out of a woman's house at four in the morning. She said, ``George? Four in the morning? No. Four in the afternoon, maybe.''

I would like to be amusing and funny today, but this is actually not a funny time. There's nothing funny about this ceremony today. It's actually rather sad. Anyone will tell you that your years in college are the best years of your life. And now, here, today they're over. The best years of your life are over. What's funny about that?

The fact that Mikhail Gorbachev is also a graduation speaker reminds me that you are in the first graduating class since the downfall of the Soviet Union. This is even more serious .

For hundreds of years the United States always had someone off shore to blame for its problems. From the very first. When the nation was first formed we blamed King George, then the French, then the Spanish, then later the Japanese and the Germans and then finally the Russians. Now we're just about out of enemies. We're down to twigs and stems. Down to small change. Down to Castro and Noriega.

We are now spending ninety billion a year to contain Castro.

Castro sent his men out to put up posters that said ``Socialism or Death!'' Somebody scribbled underneath, ``What's the difference?''

Well, I have some very sad news about the future. I think I know who is going to replace the Soviet Union as someone to blame for everything that goes wrong.

I think it might be you.

Your generation is going to be blamed for being too content and complacent, for being too selfish and myopic, for not being civic-minded enough, for not being inventive enough, not intelligent enough, not American enough, not liberal enough, not conservative enough, whatever.

You're going to wake up and find out that you're on the cover of Time magazine as the Next Great Excuse for What's Wrong with America. You'll be the Next Great Thing to Worry About. If you're not careful George Bush will seize on this as an election issue. And the next thing you know you'll face a multinational task force of middle aged reservists, a whole bunch of overweight babyboomers dressed in chocolate chip fatigues, and they all look like Schwarzkopf, and they're coming to invade you.

We're all going to miss the Soviets. The evil empire. They had a very strong impact on the country. And on my life. Back in the fifties, we thought that the Russians were actually going to bomb us. In grade school they showed us movies of these huge explosions of atom bombs. And we'd have air raid drills, where we'd run down into the basement of the school and duck and cover. And there was a siren on top of the school, and it would blow all during the air raid drills. Which I thought was a mistake. I mean you have a Russian pilot in his bomber overhead, and he looks down and here's this one building with a siren going on the roof.

Of course we knew we were completely safe.
Because we were in the basement.

In the sixties, we had to stop the Soviets in the Vietnam War. I was drafted into the army, but it was a mistake. My draft board wrote later and apologized. They said they thought I was a poor black kid.

It was very interesting. Nobody with any money or influence had to fight in Vietnam. You know the difference between Pat Buchanan, Dan Quayle, Bill Clinton and Jane Fonda? Jane Fonda was at least in Vietnam.

The Vietnam war was an interesting racial experiment. It was when white people sent black people to fight yellow people to protect the country they stole from red people.

The sixties were weird. There was this cartoonist, R. Crumb, he used to say, "If you can remember the sixties, you weren't there."

In the sixties all my friends became hippies and got into dope. I have to say that I got through the sixties without doing any dope. My father told me that the only dope worth shooting was Nixon.

You know Nixon was from Whittier, California, and out there the old timers say that to understand Richard Nixon you have to hear the story of young boy growing up in Whittier, whose proudest possession was a pony. And one day a gambler came to town and lured the boy into a card game and won the pony away. And the boy vowed that he would never gamble again. Of course I'm telling Richard Nixon's story. Nixon was the gambler.

But in the seventies the Soviets started falling apart. The Soviets decided that they wanted to be more like America. They really admired what we had accomplished in Vietnam.

So they went to Afghanistan and got stuck in their own Vietnam war. An embarrassing war, which they lost to a bunch of third-worlders who couldn't even shoot straight. And that's not easy

to do. The Soviets didn't even have General Westmoreland on their side.

And in the eighties, Gorbachev came along and tried to straighten things out. But he thought that the problem in the Soviet Union was not communism, but alcohol. He went around to the factories and tried to cut down all the vodka-drinking.

One time he got dressed up in a disguise. (You know, a hat.) He went up to a Russian worker who was operating a lathe and he asked him, "Tell me, comrade lathe operator, if you had a shot of vodka, could you still perform your job properly?" The worker thought a few seconds and then he said "Yes, I believe I could." So Gorbachev marked it down. Then he asked, "Tell me, if you had two shots of vodka could you perform your job?" The worker thought and said "Yes, I think I could." So Gorbachev marked that down. Then he asked, "If you had three shots of vodka, could you perform your job?" The worker said, "Yes, I think I could." Gorbachev could see where this was going. Exasperated he said, "Well, comrade worker, if you four shots of vodka could you perform your job?" "Yes, I think I could." "Well if you had five shots of vodka, surely you could not perform your job, could you?"

The worker said, "Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

I was in the Soviet Union last year. And I can report that it the antidote for feeling that there's something wrong with the United States. But the Russians are going to come out of this OK. They're going to develop their own auto industry and their own fast food industry and their own movie industry. And let's face it, that's civilization. In fact they've got a new national symbol - the hammer and popsicle.

But that doesn't solve your problem. Which is as I mentioned before that your generation might very well be blamed for all the things we used to blame the Soviets for. Believe me I know how this works. We need someone to blame. Especially on the editorial pages. Because if we don't have an agreed upon enemy whom we can blame without thinking, then we have to think. And that ruins the whole day.

So right now you've got to start to plan to head this off. You need a good defense of public relations. Each one of you needs a press agent. Each member of your generation needs a flack. You need someone to call up the talk shows and get you on so you can talk about what a great person you are. You need someone to get you on Good Morning America, or Good Night Pittsburgh so you can talk about yourself. Your agent will run around telling everyone that you're helping poor kids in school, making peace between street gangs, that you've written a screenplay about Mother Theresa, that you've cured the common cold and housed the homeless. .

Of course none of this is true. But that's how public relations works. It's like this. You go on TV and you talk about how you're working in the public schools, for no pay, helping poor kids. One million people see you. The next day ten thousand people read in the paper that you were lying through your teeth.

As a result, you're nine hundred and ninety thousand people ahead.

You keep doing this and pretty soon you're the education president.

That's why George Bush waited so long before he finally gave his speech after the Los Angeles riots. He wanted to wait until everyone had a TV.

The problem is: where are you going to get a public relations agent on short notice? I've solved this problem for you. Turn to the person next to you. Right? If each of you hires the person sitting next to you as your public relations agent, you're problems are solved.

Not only that, but you've got 100% employment.

And you can say, if someone asks you, "So you just graduated, what are you doing, these days?" You say, "Oh, I've got my own PR firm."

I can see that my graduation speech has degenerated to a bunch of cheap jokes. And I'm very sorry.

But my one piece of advice is - Keep your sense of humor. Take the essentially comedic view of life. Life is much too serious to take seriously. Remember Woody Allen's great joke about Life. He said Life is like the two little ladies sitting in a restaurant. And one says, "The food here is terrible." And the other one says, "I know, and such small portions."

Life is after all, essentially a joke.

If you don't think so, look at the hats you're wearing.

And it helps if you understand the joke.

You never know what the really important things are until after they're over.

Like the guy who takes a tour of Israel. And they take him to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And in great big letters it says, "To the Unknown Soldier" And down beneath, in smaller letters, it says, "Seymour Goldfarb, Orthodontist." And the guy says to the guide, "Wait a minute, How can it be that this is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier if in fact you know that he was Seymour Goldfarb, Orthodontist?" And the guide says, "Well, it's like this. As a soldier he was unknown, but as an orthodontist he was famous."

Am I out of time? I hope I'm out of time, because I'm out of speech.

I think I speak for all the faculty and family and friends when I say, "Congratulations. We hope you go far, and we hope you come back."